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# THE TRIAL OF CHRISTIANITY.

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WHEN Paul was preaching his new doctrine of Jesus and the resurrection, some eighteen hundred and fifty years ago, in Athens, he was encountered by certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Some of these looked on him as a “babbler.” Others said: “He seems to be a setter-forth of strange gods.” It is interesting to observe that the phrase thus translated actually means, “He seems to be an announcer of foreign demons,”—*ξένων δαιμονίων*. What these words show is the attitude, not of the rabble, but of philosophers, towards the new religion. They sound like an excerpt from a letter or news despatch from modern China. “Foreign demons,” or “foreign devils,” is a familiar expression in the Far East.

The term, *δαίμων*, *daimónion*, or *dæmon*, meant, in the Greek usage, first, the Divine Power, the Deity, the Divinity. Then it meant an inferior divine being. Socrates used it to designate the spirit which dwelt within him and was his monitor and guide. In the New Testament it is used to designate an evil spirit, a demon in the modern sense.

The early Christian Fathers believed that the heathen gods were demons, that is, evil powers hostile to the true God and possessing the ability to embody themselves in human form, and even to take possession of the human personality. They identified the heathen gods with devils. The makers of the Common English Version of the Bible were so imbued with this idea that they almost invariably rendered the word *δαίμων*, or *δαίμόνιον*, by “devil,” an improper, not to say impossible, translation. The view of the Church Fathers that the heathen gods were demons—actual existences, indeed, but malign in their nature and temper and under the leadership of Satan—was long maintained

in the Church. Whether any missionaries in the beginning of the great modern missionary movement held this belief, I cannot say; but the attitude of many of them towards the gods of heathen and idolatrous peoples was determined by the older view, so far that they denounced the heathen gods and the worship of them as oppugnant to the true Deity.

The Greeks, in the time of Paul, took a view of his religion, and of Jesus whom he preached, similar in form, at least, to the view which, until within a hundred years, the Christian missionary took of the gods of pagan peoples. The Greeks, however, were better-tempered or more intelligent, since they spoke of Paul as an announcer, not of foreign demons, but of foreign divinities. For many centuries the attitude of Christians towards the religions of what were called "heathen peoples" has been one of reprobation, if not of contempt. Those religions were looked upon as an evidence and aggravation of the sinfulness of the people who held them. Loyalty to God and to Jesus seemed to require intolerance of any rival; and the gods of the heathen were regarded as rivals of the Christians' God. This was not without precedent. Long before, when the worship of Yahweh rose among the Hebrews, at first He was considered to be the god of the land, as well as of the people. Such was David's view; hence he sought to bring the Ark of the Covenant out of a foreign country, the land of Baal, or the Baals, into Yahweh's land. That part of Palestine over which David ruled had become the land of Yahweh by its conquest from the Philistines. As the worship extended and devotion to Him intensified, all other gods came to be regarded, not merely as figments of an idolatrous imagination, but as false—that is, usurping—gods, rivals of Yahweh and usurpers of His prerogatives.

The Christian attitude towards the gods of un-Christian peoples was the lineal descendant of the Hebrew attitude. Yahweh, in the form Jehovah, was identified with the Father whom Jesus revealed, and all the gods of the nations were looked upon as false gods, hostile to the true Deity. The very strength of one's Christian faith seemed to intensify this feeling towards heathen religions. A charitable consideration of heathen religions would have seemed treachery to the true God and to Jesus who was identified with Him, not only in spirit, but also in substance. Yet, in the teachings and actions of Jesus, there was a germ, at least,

of the catholicity which is sympathetic towards all sincere religious thought and aspiration. The first positive manifestation of that catholicity which we see in the followers of Jesus is in Paul in Athens. He addresses the Athenians thus: "Men, Athenians, I see that in all respects ye are very religious"—that is, reverent towards the gods. The word translated "too superstitious" in the Common Version, is the comparative form of a word which means "reverencing god, or the gods, pious, religious." In later usage it came to have the sense of "superstitious," but not, I think, with possible rare exceptions, until after the beginning of the Christian era. In common usage, it had the good sense, as when one said of a man, "He is devout; he is pious." Such, undoubtedly, was the sense in which Paul used the word. That Paul was the first Christian of whom we have any record who spoke respectfully of pagan religion is not contradicted by the story of Peter's visit to Cornelius; for, though Cornelius was a Roman, he was a proselyte to Judaism, and was recognized by Peter as worshipping the same God as himself.

As in other important respects, so also in this, Paul's example was not followed by the Church. Among the Church Fathers, some, notably Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, found in the heathen religion a dim prophecy of Christianity; but the general view of the Church was what I have indicated. At last, Christians, in considerable numbers, are beginning to see that the attitude of reprobation is wrong, that the idea on which it is based is mistaken, and that the merits of Christianity are not to be measured by the degree of its hostility to other faiths. This change has been brought about, partly, by increased and more intimate knowledge of other peoples. The study of Comparative Religions has disclosed the universal elements in the various religions of the world and the points of similarity between the great ethnic faiths and Christianity. Widened and deepened acquaintance with history has made clear the truth that man is essentially a religious being, and that always and everywhere he has been inwardly moved to "feel after God, if haply he might find Him." The notion that pagan religions were devices of the devil, whereby he beguiled the souls of men to their eternal destruction, and that those, such as Buddhism, which presented striking resemblances in ritual to the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church, were peculiarly and diabolically ingenious, was discredited by a

fuller acquaintance with the real character of pagan religions and with the ideas and aspirations of the peoples who held them. Finally, the idea dawned upon some minds that religion everywhere and of every form was the expression of man's sense of God and man's outreach towards God. God has left no people without some witness of Himself. As knowledge of the religious literatures of the nations increased, men became sensible of qualities in them which show their kinship with the Hebrew psalms and oracles. They began to understand that no one people has exclusive right to call itself "the chosen people of God"; and that privilege is the measure of obligation, not a reason for self-exaltation. Without abating one jot from the intrinsic merit of the Christian revelation, they began to see that the Hindoo and the Chinaman and the Japanese were also children of God and had their contribution to make to the religious and moral life of the world.

Christianity has suffered greatly from two errors. One is the narrowing of God's interest, at first to a single people, and then to a single cult. The other is the identification of Christianity with an ecclesiastical institution and a theological system. Jesus came not to give men a religion, but to reveal God and the true spirit and manner of life. He summarized the entire significance of "the law and the prophets" in the injunction, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, . . . and thy neighbor as thyself." This injunction shows the inseparable union between real religion and morality, and announces a principle as broad as the whole of life.

The supreme test of a religion or a religious doctrine is its ability to produce good men and women and a sound and beneficent social order. It is accurately expressed in the words of Jesus, "By their fruits ye shall know them," and this test is applicable to systems and peoples as well as to individual men. Christianity is on trial to-day, a trial which is at once drastic and inescapable. The emergence of the Japanese—a people not moulded by Christian influence—the character which they display and the lofty ethical principles which are expressed in their action, raise many questions.

It will not be contested that Christian principles—that is, the principles of Christ—endure comparison with any others without disadvantage to themselves. Jesus Himself may be put by the

side of any other teacher of religious and moral truth without fear of His suffering by the comparison. But neither Jesus nor His teaching excludes the worth and truth of others; rather He welcomes all and includes all that are kindred in essence. But the suspicion arises and is growing among us that, while we are Christian in name, we are in many ways, very un-Christian in temper and conduct. The case of Russia, with its ignorant, superstitious and bigoted Church, need not be cited; we may take the most enlightened and civilized Christian nations—the British, the German, the American. The attitude which a nation assumes towards other nations and the kind of social order which it maintains within itself afford fair tests of its Christian character. Tried by this test, the so-called Christian civilization is, in many respects, decidedly un-Christian. The dominating forces in it are individualism, self-assertion, injustice, selfishness, pride and greed for riches. Christian peoples are deficient in moral discipline of the will, and in that self-effacement which is a distinguishing mark of the highest moral development. Almost invariably, “rights” take precedence over duties, and self-interest abridges or obstructs exact justice. The onlooker beholds this extraordinary spectacle, an un-Christian Christianity. There is significant confession of this in the common admission that the teachings of Jesus are not practicable in business, politics and international intercourse.

Conceivably, one may contend that our present social life is the result of a long evolution, and is economically wise and beneficent; but one cannot truthfully call it Christian. Now, if Shintoist and Buddhist Japan can produce a higher, saner, more just, more self-controlled, more unselfish individual and social life than Christian England or America, by that fact Christianity, as these peoples have interpreted and exemplified it, is proved inferior to Shintoism and Buddhism. But what really suffers by the comparison is not the Christianity of Jesus, but the Christianity of the Church, the Christianity which we have made. In other words, Christianity can maintain its preeminence only by the vital and effective incorporation of the spirit and teaching of Jesus in individual and social life and character. Nothing can invalidate this proposition. The trial which the Christian nations are facing to-day is obvious and inescapable. Let us, at least, be honest with ourselves. If we will not practise what Jesus

taught, let us cease to call ourselves Christian. It may be that some of those whom we have called "heathen" are more Christian than we.

The missionary enterprise of the Church is accounted its greatest engagement and the duty of prosecuting that enterprise its greatest obligation; and this is undoubtedly true. No great good can be possessed apart from the obligation to share it with all others; and the greater the good, the greater the obligation. But the validity of the Church's missionary enterprise rests solidly only on the demonstration that the Christian faith and the Christian principle are the best in the world. That they are the best I hold to be demonstrable, if only the testimony of men of other faiths be taken, with the evidence which the actual teachings of Jesus applied in action afford. But the enterprise is imperilled, or seriously hindered from achieving the largest results, by two main obstructions. The first is our inappreciation of other religions, and the second is the inconsistency of our life with the Christian faith and principles which we inculcate.

The truth is that humanity is one in its fundamental characteristics, needs and possibilities. Truth, righteousness, justice and good-will are essential everywhere to happy and beneficent life. That teaching which most clearly and effectively presents these is the best teaching. That life which most closely conforms to these is the best life. That faith which most directly and powerfully inspires to these is the best faith. We believe that Jesus and his teachings meet all the conditions. If we did not, we should not, when once awakened to the meaning of moral obligation, profess adherence to them. But the question is up and will not down: Are we genuinely Christian? The question is, first of all, one for the individual man and woman. It is, second, one for society. If individuals are persistently Christian, they will make society Christian. Where is the difficulty? We have not taken Jesus frankly at His own word and on His own terms. With perfect propriety, with absolute justice, He might say to us, as He said to some professed disciples in His time: "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?" We read these words in the New Testament, but, with curious fatuity, we never suspect that they are addressed to us. It may be that the Church and the Christendom which is identified with the Church are to hear the doomful words which were spoken to the ancient "elect"

people of God: "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and given to a people bringing forth the fruits thereof."

Possibly, hasty and inconsequent inferences will be drawn from what I have said thus far. Some may say that I have deliberately tried to exhibit the inadequacy of Christianity, and that I am looking elsewhere than to its Founder and Head for a purer faith and a loftier ideal. Of course, I have done nothing of the kind. Of course, too, if there were a purer faith and a loftier ideal than the Christian faith and ideal, that very fact of a superior excellence would stamp Christianity with inferiority. But no one can successfully maintain that any of the other religions of the world, as an inspiring and regulative moral force, even rivals the teaching of Jesus. He stands above all other teachers. Buddha and Confucius and Zoroaster and Mohammed are measured by the standard which He has created. He is still the Master among many masters. But, to an appalling extent, His teaching is disregarded, has, indeed, never been seriously regarded, by Christian nations. They worship Him, but do not obey Him. They blazon His cross on church and banner, but do not crucify their selfishness. They hail Him as a ransom, but abjure Him as an example.

It is not He nor His teaching which is on trial; it is the spurious Christianity which leaves human society still the prey of greedy lusts and the victim of unrighteous craft and wicked oppression. Why are the people, in increasing numbers, drifting away from the Church? Because they have begun to suspect the genuineness of a religion which finds profit in the practical denial of its own primary principles. In innumerable instances, professed Christians are the chief exploiters of their fellow men for gain, the chief advocates of a social caste which dooms a race to practical serfdom because of its color, and the chief supporters of a vast system of political corruption. In several great Christian nations a formal alliance exists between Church and State; in nearly all a formal alliance exists between Church and School. But, as an English writer (the editor of "The Hibbert Journal") has recently said:

"This alliance, in spite of the inseparable connection between Religion and Ethics, has failed, so far, to be productive of any combined and determined endeavor to build up the character of the people. For Religion itself has drifted away from its ethical basis; hence 'religious teaching' has come to mean anything and everything except the one

thing it ought to mean. All kinds of side issues—some of which are none too creditable to the parties concerned—have been suffered to obscure the central purpose of education. We have made idols of our theological jealousies and ecclesiastical divisions, and in blind devotion to these have trusted to scraps of doctrinal patter to form the manhood of the race, and to save us from being as Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment."

What immediately follows by Mr. Jacks does not so accurately apply to many of our schools as it does to English schools, but it is not without application even here:

"In how many of the schools of the people are the lessons of private and social duty being effectively taught? How many make it their aim to teach the elements of self-respect and self-control? Where do we find a higher place given to courtesy, self-subordination, temperance, courage, filial piety, than to the Latin accidence or 'the requirements of the code'? Where is it taught as a daily lesson—as a truth never to be forgotten by poor man or rich—that there are objects and occasions in the presence of which life is to be counted as nothing worth, and freely offered in sacrifice? Bushido (the Japanese ethical code) may be a poor thing—I do not think so—but what would one give for a breath of Bushido among the vicious and anæmic youths who throng the lighted thoroughfares of our great towns, among the idle rich, among the drunken thousands of Glasgow, Liverpool, Birmingham, or the East End?"

He might have added New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston.

For a long time, the Christian nations have assumed and exercised supremacy in war and have carried the instruments and methods of war to the highest pitch of murderous efficiency. But the rise of Japan has given this complacent assumption a severe shock. She has done this by the type of manhood, in leader and led, which she has produced; and Japan is a non-Christian nation. In several of the Christian nations—notably in England, where Parliamentary inquiries have been conducted on this matter—there is observable a distinct deterioration of average manhood. Is it because, as Mr. Jacks suggests, "by far the largest part of the energies of Christendom have hitherto been used up in preparation for mutual destruction"? If it is, we may accept his conclusion that:

"It is small wonder that these communities have developed internal evils which make their civilization, if not a failure, at all events a meagre

success. Judged by the condition of the masses of the people, there is not one of the great lands of Christendom which can boast itself free from the danger of moral and physical decay. All their energies are needed for the solution of the problems hence arising; they have none to spare upon the blowing of each other's souls into eternity. The question whether this one shall rise or that one fall is of little moment, compared with the greater question whether all are not falling together. The answer to that question depends on how long they are content to leave their social problems unsolved."

The writer whom I have quoted concludes:

"For nations, as for individuals, the mere profession of Christianity is a vain thing: the claim of Christianity to be supreme must assuredly fail unless it finds its exponent in renovated national life."

I have quoted at some length because in these words the truth is so clearly and strongly put. The future of Christianity depends on the faithfulness with which Christians exhibit its pure spirit and exemplify its exalted principles. That is a matter which comes home to us all. Our religion must make men and women of the highest character and a social order which is at once benign and just, or it will stand disapproved by the judgment of the world as inadequate to the demands of human life; and the fault will not be with Jesus or the doctrines which He taught, but with us. To the Christianity which we have made will be applied—is being applied—the supreme test: "By its fruits ye shall know it."

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